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Roma Cultural Mediation in a Selection of Irish Schools

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Executive Summary

This report explores the role and impact of a Roma Cultural Mediator (RCM) working across four schools in Dublin's North Inner City. Based on interviews, observations and focus groups with Roma children and families, school staff, Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) and School Completion Programme (SCP) personnel, the research offers an in-depth look at how cultural mediation supports school attendance, engagement and inclusion for Roma pupils in these schools.

Roma communities in Ireland experience significant structural barriers in accessing education, including racism, housing instability, poverty, limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity with the Irish education system. These challenges are compounded by widespread antigypsyism, both systemic and interpersonal. The RCM role provides a critical link between families and schools, bridging linguistic, cultural and institutional gaps.

Embedded within the SCP, the study found that the RCM is not a supplementary figure, but a central actor in facilitating access to education. Her work encompasses interpretation, system navigation, home visits, relationship-building, small group sessions with children and support during transitions from primary to post-primary education. She also plays a key role in liaising with EWOs, helping to avert breakdowns in communication that might otherwise lead to legal consequences for families due to non-attendance.

One of the strongest findings of the research is the level of trust the RCM has earned within the Roma community. Despite not being Roma herself, her linguistic and cultural proximity, her longstanding involvement and her relational approach have led to high levels of confidence among families. This trust enables her to reach students and parents in ways that schools and statutory services often cannot. Participants highlighted the RCM's flexible, relational approach and described her work as transformative. Teachers noted improvements in attendance and engagement, while children valued the opportunity to connect with someone who speaks their language, cares about them and understands their world, aligning quite clearly with the goals of the SCP. The RCM also supported children's transitions to new schools, explained assessment processes to families, and acted as an informal educator, providing targeted support in language and social development.

However, the study also found that the RCM operates under precarious conditions: part-time hours, short-term contracts and limited resources constrain her reach. Furthermore, when students transition to schools outside her SCP cluster, the support often drops off, sometimes at the point when it is most needed.

Key recommendations include formalising and expanding the RCM role, ensuring sustainable contracts and continuity of support across school transitions and recognising the pedagogical dimension of this form of school-based mediation work. The findings call for a shift in how cultural mediation is understood, as a vital part of the educational infrastructure required for equity. This report concludes that Roma Cultural Mediation, when properly resourced, is a powerful mechanism for enabling inclusion. It offers not only support to Roma families, but also a mirror to the education system, revealing where policy and practice must change to become truly inclusive.

Introduction and Context

The term “Roma” is used to refer to the international Roma community, which consists of different groups that share common history, traditions, and culture (Lesovitch, 2005), including, but not limited to, Sinti, Manouche, Lovari, Gitano, and Ashkali (McGarry, 2014). Present-day Roma consist of nomadic, semi-nomadic and sedentary groups. Roma encounter “frequent barriers to exercising their fundamental rights” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014) and experience racism and discrimination in relation to *inter alia* employment, healthcare, law enforcement and education. This racism may be understood as “antigypsyism”, which is:

a historically rooted structural phenomenon that appears at institutional, social and interpersonal levels. It has its origins in how the majority views and treats those considered ‘gypsies’. It is rooted in a process of ‘othering’ that builds on negative as well as positive, exoticising stereotypes (European Commission, 2021, p. 1).

Despite ongoing discrimination, and a history of persecution and attempted genocide, Roma make considerable contributions to local and national societies, from arts and culture through to the economy and community development (Harvard, 2024). Such societal contributions notwithstanding, Roma communities are understood as “one of the most marginalized communities on the continent of Europe” (OECD, 2020, p. 21) and routinely experience “chronic inequality” (Abad-

Merino et al, 2024, p. 594) in education. This report offers an insight into the impact of an intervention that seeks to challenge such chronic inequality, the provision of Roma Cultural Mediation services, in a selection of schools in Dublin’ North Inner City.

This section of the report introduces the research and sets the work within the context of the experiences of members of the Roma community in Ireland and the broader literature on the educational experiences of members of the Roma community. The section concludes by introducing the concept of Roma Cultural Mediation.

Roma in Ireland

Roma are relatively new migrants to Ireland. In the early 1990s small numbers of Roma people sought out short term work in the state. These numbers increased following the enlargement of the EU when Roma “migrated to Ireland as EU citizens” (Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, 2018, p. 25). According to the most recent census data, there are 16,059 Roma people living in the state (CSO, 2023), out of a total European population of between 10 and 12 million. These data point to a significantly higher number of Roma people in Ireland than previous work, frequently estimated at 5,000 (Department of Justice and Equality Ireland, 2016). For context, there were just under 33,000 Irish Travellers living in Ireland in 2022 (CSO, 2023).

While research about the Roma community in Ireland is limited (Kirwan and Jacob, 2016), there is evidence of many Roma individuals experiencing

difficulties in accessing public services such as education, health services, employment (HSE, 2025) and social services (O’Sullivan et al., 2023). Writing in 2010, van Hout demonstrated significant discrimination and exclusion in areas such as residency and welfare, education, employment and health. Arguing for a robust inclusive approach to supporting the integration of members of the Roma community, van Hout identified that this would provide “a sense of belonging, as full citizens of their host country” (2010, p. 138). In a study by Kennedy et al. (2019), which assessed the needs of the Roma community through participatory research methods, it was found that an overwhelming 94.9% of their participants had reported experiences of discrimination. Drilling down into these figures, participants reported discrimination in:

...accessing social protection (84.3%); accessing employment (78.9%); at health services (70.5%); getting served in a shop, restaurant, pub or other social venue (74.7%); in the street or another public setting (81.1%); from the police or in the courts (53.8%) ...accessing accommodation (93%) and 76.2% by a landlord or local authority (p. 64).

Other reports share that members of the Roma community are not only completely marginalised in Ireland, but some are often living without very basic necessities such as food, fuel or water (Curran, 2019). Additional barriers for Roma in Ireland include limited English language skills, poor literacy and low

comprehension level of Irish culture and society. These often result in few employment opportunities, issues with completing health service forms, not understanding medical treatments, and negative experiences of the education system in Ireland. Carron-Kee et al. (2024) found that attitudes towards Travellers and Roma among the general population in Ireland to be “startlingly negative” (p. 38), while McGarry points to “virulent hostility” and “extreme racism” towards members of the Roma community (2014, p. 763).

Roma and education in Ireland

A total of 3,404 Roma children are enrolled in primary and post-primary schools across Ireland (2,629 in primary school and 1,775 in post-primary school) (Department of Education (DE), 2024). Kennedy and Smith (2019) laid bare the “very real obstacles faced by Roma pupils in Ireland”, including those caused by communication problems and cultural and language barriers. Mc Daid, Share and Lolich (2023) found significant concern among staff in schools, community agencies and the School Completion Programme (SCP) personnel in relation to levels of attendance and engagement by Roma pupils enrolled in their school. These issues were exacerbated by the switch to online learning due to Covid 19 and the housing crisis within their catchment areas which means that some pupils have a long commute to school. The transfer of Roma children from primary to post-primary school decreased by just over 8% after the Covid 19 pandemic (DE, 2024), while the total enrolments of Roma children in Early Childhood Education

decreased by 25.6% from 2018 to 2020 (Kenny, 2024).

Roma children who attend school in Ireland have been reported to “hide their Roma identity in school to protect against bullying and discrimination” (Curran, 2019, p. 133). Furthermore, Roma children’s experiences within the Irish education system are further impacted by Roma parents’ lack of understanding of the Irish education system due to low literacy levels and experience with education more generally (Curran, 2019). Such dynamics contribute to an understanding of Roma as an at-risk population within the Irish education system.

In this context then, challenges abound in respect of attendance, engagement and completion of school. The literature is clear on the importance of high-quality school engagement in support of children at risk of early school dropout. Furthermore, high levels of school engagement are related to improved academic achievement and personal development (Moreira, Bilimória and Lopes, 2022). School attendance is an obvious prerequisite for high levels of school engagement. School attendance, or more accurately, School Attendance Problems (SAPs), which includes partial-day absences, in addition to full-day and prolonged absences has been identified as a key challenge experienced by both Roma children and their schools (Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2023). Much of the emphasis on SAP focusses on truancy, school refusal and lack of parental support in encouraging and facilitating school attendance (Pérez-Marco et al., 2025).

School-based influences include racism, culturally unresponsive pedagogical practices and lower teacher expectations. A further structural issue that is relevant across the Irish education system is the over-representation of Roma children placed on a Reduced School Day (RSD) (DE, 2025).

In response to the challenges faced by Roma in Irish education, the Department of Education launched the *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030* (DE, 2024), as part of the wider National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, which aims to “improve the learning experience of Travellers and Roma at all levels of the education system” (p. 28) through the implementation of four proposed pillars:

- (1) participation and experience,
- (2) access and outcomes,
- (3) partnership,
- (4) delivering change.

The strategy recommends structural changes in the Irish education system including the establishment of particular roles, funding models and oversight groups to better support Traveller and Roma children and young people within the Irish education system. In support of the plan, the DE has committed to establishing twelve Community Link Worker roles to support Traveller and Roma children and young people by providing vital engagement between schools and communities. It appears that these roles will take on some similar roles to cultural mediators. The next section of this paper explores the specific work of Roma cultural mediators.

Roma Cultural Mediators

Cultural mediation is both a relational and interpretive activity that demands a capacity to interpret and comprehend the complex relationship between two parties (Liddicoat, 2016). According to Liégeois (2013), in 1995 the European Network for the Promotion of Gypsies and Travellers commenced the training of cultural mediators with organisations from Belgium, Spain, France, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Portugal. The ROMED programme, established by the Council of Europe in 2011 to train Roma mediators, has worked to promote effective intercultural mediation to improve the communication and co-operation between Roma and public institutions and operates on that basis of “individuals with a Roma background, from local Roma communities or with a good knowledge of Roma issues” acting as mediators between members of Roma communities and public institutions” (Kyuchukov, 2012, p. 375).

In the international context, the role of the cultural mediator is often debated. In South Africa, cultural mediators are also linked to the roles of linguistic and cultural translators (Bedeker and Feinauer, 2006), while in the United Kingdom (UK) ongoing debates argue whether or not cultural mediators and translators should be considered as separate roles (Wang, 2017). In the United States of America (USA) and Italy, research argues that the cultural mediator is a link between cultures and social systems that assessed the needs of immigrant families and individuals (Bochner, 1986; Gobbo, 2004). In some cases, the roles of Roma mediators are more elaborate. Helakorpi

et al. (2019), for example, in their account of mediators in Finland describe that, in addition to facilitating communication between members of the Roma communities and a range of school staff, that they are also expected to act as role models for Roma children, support their identity and make them feel secure. They are also expected to educate the school community about Roma culture and to promote tolerance.

In the general sense, cultural mediation has been proven to not only support a better understanding of available resources in one’s respective community but also has demonstrated improvements in the development of “various non-linguistic competences” (Pundziuvienė, 2023, p.121). The European Council (2024) also argues that the implementation of the cultural mediator as a method for supporting the integration of minority ethnic groups allows for the development of migrants’ confidence to be participants in their host society. Indeed, the use of cultural mediation has allowed for the promotion of inclusiveness and interculturality despite a lack of consolidation and job security (Llevot-Calvet & Garreta-Bochaca, 2024).

Research on the role of cultural mediators for the Roma community in Ireland is quite limited. While not specifically focused on schools, the Roma Cultural Mediation Project, part of the broader transnational TRIALOG network, previously operated in Dublin to act as a link between service providers and Roma

to facilitate access to social and health services (EQUAL, 2010). The Logan Report, which identified the “inappropriate removal of two Roma children from their families under Sect.12 of the Childcare Act of 1991” (O’Sullivan et al., 2023, p. 714), recommended that the Irish Government commit the appropriate resources and collaborate with the Council of Europe and ROMED to develop a more accessible cultural mediation programme in Ireland. The Tallaght Roma Integration Project benefitted significantly from the involvement of Roma Cultural Mediators (Jacob and Kirwan, 2016). However, despite this, Roma Cultural Mediators remain limited in Ireland, with little research available surrounding the crucial role that supports the Roma community. Furthermore, while some work has been undertaken in respect of broader cultural mediation in Irish schools (Mc Daid, 2019), the proposed Community Link Workers will be the first to focus specifically on Roma

Roma Cultural Mediation is not without its critics. Observers have pointed to the apparent ambiguity surrounding the initiative arguing that the omission of broader socioeconomic, political and historical contexts continue the marginalisation of the Roma community, as they can emphasise changing individual attitudes, leaving both cultural mediators and members of the Roma community at a disadvantage (Kócze, 2019). Kyuchukov (2012) also argues that Roma cultural mediators are often forced to deal with low status and precarious employment conditions, including the expectation that

they resolve issues that are not inclusive to their initial job description. For RCMs working in the Irish education system, this is further exacerbated by the limited diversity among the teaching workforce in Irish schools, (Keane, Heinz and Mc Daid, 2023; Walsh and Mc Daid, 2019) meaning they may struggle for legitimacy as key education workers. While solutions to these critiques may demand systemic responses, it remains apparent that the Roma Cultural Mediators, particularly in the context of supporting the Roma community in schools, requires further attention in order to provide the necessary supports to aid the integration of Roma into their respective communities.

Having provided an overview of the context within which this study takes place, the next section will provide an account of the methodology which underpinned the research upon which this report is based.

Methodology

The primary aim of this project was to examine the impact of the provision of Roma Cultural Mediation, through the School Completion Programme (SCP), on the educational experiences of Roma children and their families in three primary and one post-primary schools in Dublin's North Inner City. The project was guided by two objectives:

1. To analyse the impact of interpretation and cultural mediation support with Roma children and their families
2. To provide recommendations for the way in which such work might be developed and extended across other schools working with both the Roma community and other migrant communities who experience challenges attending, engaging with and completing school in Ireland.

A multimethods research design was employed and data were generated with Roma children and young people in both the primary and secondary schools ($n=19$). Ethical approval was granted by the Marino Ethics in Research Committee. Research instruments included semi-structured and unstructured one-to-one interviews and group interviews, accompanied by the generation of artwork by some of the students. Interviews and observations were conducted with Roma parents. Interviews were held with a variety of school staff, ranging from school principals to class teachers and support teachers to Home School Community Liaison Teachers (HSCL). Interviews were also held with two Education Welfare Officers (EWO) two staff from two local

School Completion Programmes. Finally, a series of interviews and participant observations were undertaken with the RCM. The RCM is employed on a part-time basis by the two SCPs represented in the study. She is not a member of the Roma community, but has spent a considerable amount of time working in support roles with the community in Ireland. Furthermore, she speaks fluent Romanian, a vital linguistic asset when working with both the students and families in her current role.

In terms of fieldwork, The RCM acted as an intermediary between the researchers and the Roma children and families who participated in the study. The fieldwork was undertaken by the PI (Male) and the Research Assistant (Female). Following Molnar and Vallés (2023) and Romano Waśt (2016) on the importance of considering the impact of gender in conducting interviews with Roma women, it was decided that the RA would undertake the interviews, with the support of the RCM as interpreter, with the mothers, who were dropping off, or picking their children up from school. The literature is emphatic that members of the Roma community in Ireland are subject to systemic racism. Cognisant that research participants from marginalised groups are potentially vulnerable to being re-traumatised during the research process (Wojnicka and Nowicka, 2023), the researchers assiduously avoided raising issues about experiences of racism in their interactions with Roma children and families. Following an initial round of interviews, it was decided by the research team, in consultation with the RCM, to move towards observations, with brief conversations with participants, rather

than focus on more formal interviews with the Roma parents.

Inductive thematic analysis based on three phases: Initial coding, focussed coding and theme generation was employed in the analysis of the data. Following the initial coding which was undertaken on a line-by-line basis of the transcribed data, focused coding involved the identification of more significant codes that explained larger sections of the data. The researchers collapsed a series of these initial codes into more focused codes. These focused codes were discussed with the RCM and analyses were further refined to pay attention to the organisation and management of the services provided.

Two important methodological limitations need to be acknowledged. The first pertains to the role of the RCM in the fieldwork. As this study did set out to examine not the RCM themselves, but the work they undertake in their role, it is possible that participants were less forthcoming with criticisms of the role, while the RCM was present. The researchers employed critical reflexivity in respect of this issue, paying strong attention to the generation of data through observations and interviews when the RCM was not present to triangulate in respect of understandings of the cultural mediation work. The second limitation relates to the extent and scope of the work. As noted above, a decision was taken to move away from more formal interviews with the parents towards observational work. This was done out of a sense of ethics and respect for the participants. The timeframe available for fieldwork limited possibilities to develop trust between the researchers

and the parents, the support of the RCM notwithstanding.

Findings and Analysis

At the start of this section, it is important to highlight that there is overwhelming positive support and a deep appreciation for the work undertaken by the RCM by all participants in the study. One student mentioned how he “love[s] her . . . she helps us and is really kind” while another said, “I love coming up to her”. A third student relayed how the RCM provided particular support for him as he works his way through “issues”, saying, “Yeah, because [talking] helps me with . . . with my anger. Because I have anger issues . . . it does get me into trouble”. Some of the parents mentioned how the RCM is “so good, so helpful”, “she does her best for me” and “helps with everything”. One teacher mentioned how the RCM is “a massive benefit and to the work that I do . . . She is a godsend”, while another pleaded that they wanted “lots of [named RCM], because her work was “invaluable”. A third teacher identified how without the work of the RCM, “we would have lost that family”, a reference to the very valuable contribution made by the RCM in maintaining a particular family within a school.

In demonstration of this overall finding, the report proceeds to examine the ways in which the RCM contributes positively to the *attendance* and *engagement* of the Roma children in the schools around which the study was based. Apart from the above paragraph, this report does not isolate the work of the RCM; instead, her contribution is integrated throughout, as she consistently underpins each area of Roma children’s educational experience.

Attendance

School attendance is foundational to successful school engagement and completion. In its absence, school-engagement cannot be sustained, and smooth transitions become impossible. Yet for some of the Roma pupils and students in the schools in this study, school attendance is an ongoing challenge, as emphasised by school staff, Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) and SCP staff. For example, according to one of the SCP staff:

This is a group that we are becoming more and more concerned by and we are increasing our focus.

According to one of the EWOs:

We’re seeing more and more referrals due to non-attendance, and a large portion of those are Roma students. (EWO 1)

While this points to a general increase in relation to SAP, something that has been highlighted in TESS school attendance data (DE, 2024), this can be quite acute for Roma children. It is important to note that the reasons are multifaceted and may include fear of physical safety, frequent family moves, financial hardship, cultural expectations and systemic misunderstandings. The RCM’s work is vital in navigating these complexities.

Financial Barriers: Accommodation and Attire

It is evident from the data that some of the Roma children and their families were living in really poor accommodation, with over-crowding, cold and damp featuring in

descriptions of housing provided by participants. One family visited by the RCM were living in a caravan that “didn’t have hot water or heating. It was a struggle”. A second family were living in what was described as “little more than a shed . . . [the] roof was leaning against the wall” (RCM). When the RCM supported a member of school staff in a visit to this home, they both became aware of the very considerable difficulties being faced by the children and this cast a new light on understanding their engagement with school and what has previously been understood as a lack of support on the part of their mother for their education. According to the RCM:

if you’re [dealing] with that, how can you also deal with all that the children need for school.

Due to the problems in securing affordable housing, the families of some of the Roma children in the schools in the study had decided to move to areas of Dublin, or to neighbouring counties, with cheaper rents. While some families who moved had decided to transfer their children to schools closer to their new homes, it is notable that some of the families maintained their children in their original schools in Dublin’s North Inner City. The positive ways in which the children and families spoke about the schools, the RCM and some of school staff, clearly impacted on their decision to remain in their original school. This decision did, of course, cause some difficulties in respect of attendance, with an increase in distance, time and associated costs in relation to taking public transport. The RCM was particularly instrumental in supporting the HSCL within one of the schools to support those

children in accessing appropriate supports to ease their challenges in commuting to school. As explained by the HSCL:

myself and [the RCM] have driven up to [named county] to meet families. You know, when they haven’t been in school, just to see how we can support them. It might be that they needed Leap cards . . . they couldn’t get to school, they couldn’t afford it, things like that. But like without [RCM], I can’t do that.

The RCM was able to interpret for the HSCL on that home visit, but just as importantly, she was also trading on the trust she had built up with that family to navigate the difficult conversation about the ways in which the parents might be supported to make sure their children kept coming to the school.

In this context, there is clear evidence of the RCM’s work extending far beyond the gates of the school as she liaised with families to explain entitlements, connected them with supports and even mediated between schools and parents when attendance and associated policies clashed with late arrivals and absences. According to the RCM:

[schools] became better at understanding why they were late when they knew the problems getting here.

While most of the schools in the study appeared to have a quite an inclusive approach to the issue of school uniforms, with spare, often donated uniforms available or a “blind-eye” (Primary Teacher 2) turned to incidents when children were

not attired in accordance with the relevant school policy, this issue did surface occasionally. There were incidents when, according to the RCM, uniform policies “surfaced as a barrier . . . a problem when families cannot afford new clothing . . . But the parents don’t have money to buy it.”

Competing Priorities and Completing Schooling

In addition to the understanding of the financial barriers experienced by members of the Roma community which impact on their engagement with school, certain school staff did also indicate an understanding that some of parents of the Roma children in their school did not appear to place an appropriate level of value on schooling. For example, one teacher described this dynamic:

The lads are expected to go out and work... the girls, get married young. Education becomes secondary. (Post-primary Teacher 1)

The RCM explained that these competing forces can mean that schooling loses out. Furthermore, she argued that this competition can become quite pronounced as Roma children progress through post-primary school. There was no lack of ambition among the Roma children in the study. Some of the post-primary students, for example, mentioned “electrician”, “architect”, “Youtuber” and “boxer” as possibly career pathways. The student who spoke about wishing to become an architect did understand the need to continue with schooling to allow him access to that career. The RCM was clear that some of the participating children would struggle to complete their

post-primary education, a sentiment echoed by school and support service staff. Some of this was attributed to a tension between attending school and attending to other elements of life, such as paid work outside the home, caring work in the home and starting new families. Such tensions were laid bare by one of the students in the post-primary school when he spoke about his 16-year-old sister, who moved with him to Ireland in the previous five years. The student explained that his sister had strong intentions to leave school as early as possible, with a focus on starting her own family being one of the primary driving forces for this intention.

The majority of the primary school children in the study spoke highly about their experiences of the teachers in their school. They used words like, “nice”, “friendly” and “helpful” to describe their teachers. Some of the post-primary participants also identified particular teachers who had been really supportive of them saying about one teacher, “she spends a lot of time with us” and “she cares about me”. One of the participants mentioned how a particular teacher takes time to “listen to me”, something that showed they care. One of the primary children, in sixth class, mentioned how his father had been very impressed when he paid a visit to the secondary school his son would attend from the following August saying:

He likes the teachers, all of how they are, how they talk . . . my dad likes how the teacher comes and talks with me.

There were, however, some examples of less positive experiences of teachers,

especially as related by the post-primary participants, mentioning that some of the teachers are racist, “making fun” and “always at me”. One participant explained that one teacher in particular will always give out to the Roma children but “won’t get upset with the Irish students for doing the same thing”. The children were also quite unhappy at never having the chance to use their own language in school with examples of times when teachers told them to only use English.

Concerns for Physical Safety

Following on from the observations above in respect of experiences in school, there are two areas in which some of the participants reflected on concerns for their own physical safety. The first of these lies in relation to fights in school, while the second relates to the riot in Dublin in November, 2023.

While the specific issue of transitions is dealt with in another section, the issue of fighting and physical safety features quite strongly for some of the children who were preparing to move into post-primary school. This was also an issue which featured in the conversations with the post-primary children. Some of the sixth-class children had heard a lot from older siblings and cousins about fights and trouble in post-primary, while some had also witnessed some fights after school. There was some concern about it being difficult to avoid fights, while there was also some concern about the implications of getting caught up in trouble:

Interviewer: you say that RCM does a lot of work to help you think about doing that. How do

you feel about going to [named post-primary school]?

Participant 1: Happy, a little bit happy

Participant 2: A little bit scared, because I heard like a lot of fights . . . a lot of problems.

Interviewer: Yeah? Who told you about the fights?

Participant 2: No, I’ve just seen them.

Interviewer: Oh, you’ve seen them?

Participant 2: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. How would you see them? Outside of school, or?

Participant 2: Yeah, like after school.

Interviewer: OK, OK. And that makes you feel a little bit worried?

Participant 2: Yeah . . . That’s what I would say.

Interviewer: Are you afraid that you’ll end up fighting, or that you will end up seeing it?

Participant 2: No, like, I’m scared to not get injured.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. But it mightn’t be so easy.

Participant 2: Sorry?

Interviewer: It might be difficult not to fight, is it?

Participant 2: No, I'm just scared to not have any problems and get kicked out, because my mum said that this is a good school for me, like it's close to my house, like five minutes.

Some of the post-primary students mentioned that while they have seen other children get bullied in school, that they have developed a strategy of "sticking together" and not showing weakness so that they will not be bullied. For these participants, there is support in numbers and in also demonstrating readiness to defend each other so that they will not be bullied. One of the other post-primary boys mentioned how he had been in a lot of fights when he first arrived into Ireland but his strategy has been not to draw attention to himself and this has worked to make sure he stays out of trouble.

The impact of the riot in Dublin in November 2023 was a strong feature in the research. One EWO, for example, reported how some Roma parents told her that "we are afraid to get on the buses. We are afraid we've got threatened and we're on public transport you know you know we're living in a hotel, and we are afraid and all of that". The officer proceeded to explain that:

Men, women and children. No one was leaving the house ... the parents were literally saying 'he can't go to work. It's not safe. What do we do with no food?' ... we found out parents were sending their children who were sick to the doctor with hotel workers .

. . I heard stories from families, being threatened on the buses, and obviously I had one mum tell me that. You know, her daughter wore the, you know, the long skirt, very visibly Roma . . . very fearful of being in around the city centre wearing those clothes for her daughter. (EWO 2)

One HSCL reported the effect of the riots on the Roma children in her school saying, "obviously, the riots had a massive impact . . . just all of a sudden there were no Roma kids in school". The teacher proceeded to explain that many families spoke about leaving Ireland for their safety, "a lot of families were like, 'we have to go back to Romania, we're not safe here anymore' . . . they felt really, really unsafe". The school was really concerned to provide support for the families and struggled to get the parents to come to the school so that they could address their fears:

they needed to come to hear from the school that we were going to keep their children safe . . . so they needed to know that we were there for them all the time and whatever they needed, like we'd provide that.

The RCM proved pivotal in supporting the families to return to school. The RCM herself recalled how the Roma community "were so afraid that they would be attacked, they stayed in their hostels and homes". Highlighting that they felt very identifiable, the RCM explained how the "mothers were so afraid to be targeted because of what they wore." The level of trust that the families had in the RCM was central in providing assurance that the

situation was not as dangerous as had been built up in the aftermath of the riot. This trust was earned on the basis of “hard work, spending time and helping, helping, helping” the families. The Roma families trusted her enough to welcome her into their homes. The RCM reported how she worked closely with the families, walking some of them to and from the school, in an effort to provide a sense of security and safety for them, saying, “they trusted me to try to keep them safe”. This was another key contribution to encouraging the families to allow their children to return to school. According to one HSCL:

RCM was brilliant . . . Organised coffee morning and stayed in touch . . . visited the house . . . Much better, much better. All the children are back in school and everything like that . . . And so yeah, it’s a lot better now.

Transitions as Pitfalls

Roma parents in Ireland are frequently unfamiliar with the organisation, structure and legislative base of the Irish education system. This is doubly challenging for these parents; In addition to perhaps not having prolonged experience of formal education systems at all, because of their migration to Ireland, they face the further complication of trying to navigate a system without limited relevant cultural or linguistic knowledge. There is an abundance of examples in this study of occasions when parents did not return forms, attend certain meetings or complete requirements, not necessarily because of carelessness, but because they

were unaware of their responsibilities and the requirements of the system.

Points of transition are one clear area where this challenge becomes particularly pronounced. These are seen as vulnerable junctures in a child’s education. For Roma children and their families, who may face unfamiliar systems, unspoken expectations and linguistic barriers, these transitions can lead to problematic attendance unless carefully supported. Failure to apply for a place in a primary school, for example, can mean that a child will not commence school with an aligned age-cohort of children. Even when a parent has a child already in a school, teachers report having to support, with the aid of the RCM, a parent to complete the relevant forms in support of an application for a younger sibling. The transition from primary to post-primary is another point of considerable risk. In observations of the RCM interaction with parents, support with information about moving from primary to post-primary school was one of the areas most in demand. The children themselves were also really complimentary of the role of the RCM at this point in their school careers. One of the focus group participants, for example, mentioned how the RCM, “helps us with secondary, like, what to do if we have problems. She explains everything”. The RCM plays a vital role here, acting as a consistent and trusted presence across levels and settings.

School transitions require paperwork, applications and deadlines. Many Roma parents, unfamiliar with the Irish education system, are unaware of the specifics of some of these processes and procedures. According to one HSCL:

We had to sit down and explain. They thought the kids would just stay in the same school. We went door to door, with [the RCM], doing the applications together. (HSCL 1).

The pressure on parents at this point was captured by one of the EWOs as follows:

Some parents just freeze when asked to fill a form. She [the RCM] breaks it down, takes the time. That makes the difference between enrolment and no enrolment. (EWO 1)

The RCM's presence is both supportive and reassuring. In ways, she translates more than words, she translates systems. This work in support of transition from primary to post-primary is really important, not just in ensuring registration, but also in support of attendance in the post-primary school. Several of the participants observed that the transition to post-primary often brings a sharp drop in attendance. One of the reasons for this can be the change in support structures, moving from one main teacher to many teachers in post-primary:

In primary, you've one teacher, one class. It's consistent. Secondary [you have] nine teachers, no afterschool supports. (HSCL 2)

One of the post-primary students mentioned how they "liked primary school [because] of good teachers and my class like", though they found the "moving about" and "many teachers" very hard in their post-primary school.

Even when the primary to post-primary transition has been smooth and successful, issues with attendance can

begin to occur quite early in a Roma student's career in post-primary. According to one post-primary teacher:

"First year is good. But once second year hits, the drop-off begins. Unless they've done their full primary in Ireland, it's hard to hold onto them." (Post-primary teacher 2)

It is interesting that this teacher observes the importance of schooling experience in Ireland, probably aligned with greater proficiency in English, as making an important contribution in improving successful attendance for Roma children in Irish schools. The role of the RCM remains important here nonetheless, as she offers reassurance, continuity and explanation, not just to students, but to their families.

Attendance and Legislation

As noted above, many Roma parents appear to be unfamiliar with processes and procedures within the Irish education system. This lack of familiarity can also extend to the legislative basis of the education system, seen most pronouncedly in this study, with the legislation surrounding school attendance. All EWOs have a clear responsibility in respect of school attendance, and the legislation makes provision for a number of actions, up to and including legal action which may mean that a parent or guardian is taken to court. This happens in very few cases and only when all other attempts at support have failed and the parent(s) are clearly not engaging with the EWO in respect of the attendance of their child at school. While such legislative recourse is deemed to be necessary, avoidance of

such experience through engagement in support of attendance, is generally understood to be in the best interests of all concerned. There is clear evidence from this study that the RCM provides invaluable support to the EWOs and through the work of the SCP, to offset against this development. In the first instance, the RCM plays a strong role in raising information about the legislation with Roma parents and students. The RCM also plays a considerable role in supporting Roma parents in their engagement with a relevant EWO. This is important because, according to one of the EWOs:

There's always that little bit of fear when I arrive. They see us as some kind of authority, and they don't trust it. (EWO 1)

The second EWO provided a detailed account of the support provided in these engagements:

So [RCM] will be present at 90% of my attendance clinics . . . I'm very conscious of mum's or dad's level of English and many, many times when I ring up a parent for the first time I'll, I'll hear a little English. Either they'll call me back or I can ring [RCM] and say 'look, you know, this family. Can you tell me much about them? Can you reach out? I'm available to meet them,' and we'll negotiate a meeting that way.

The availability of the RCM has proven really important, for example, in clarifying why certain parents appear not to have engaged in a process with the EWO:

So basically I would find that a lot of the letters that I sent to parents don't get delivered, they're register posted, they're bounced back to me, it's returned to sender. And very much I could have easily assumed that parents aren't answering these letters, but when I actually go and visit homes, parents are in an apartment block. There mightn't be a visible entry to the apartment block. There might be a visible letter box. And it's only through discussion with [RCM] that a parent will explain, 'I didn't, I didn't get the letter' or whatever.

The work of the EWO is improved by having access to the RCM, not simply because she can translate and interpret, but also because of her cultural knowledge and the relationships of trust she has built up with members of the Roma community. The following example demonstrates how such attributes were important in casting light on a tricky issue of non-attendance:

Oh my gosh, it's invaluable. And I'll just give you an example. I had a parent [and] ... there was a lot going on for the young person and I was really of the opinion that these parents didn't want to engage and their engagement was very much surface level . . . Dad came to the meeting, and he obviously had a lot of barriers to even getting out the door that day. And there's a lot going on for him. And it was very frustrating and there was a younger child there. He had his own . . . He was bringing his own energy to the meeting. And you know, I just

asked a couple of questions at the end of the meeting, and it flipped everything on its head. Prior to that, I was of the belief that this dad had the attitude that he didn't want his son in school. He wasn't willing to engage. And whatever question was asked, it flipped everything on his head. And it's the dad put his two hands up in the air and was like, I want him in school. We want him in school. So, it was very much a turning point.

The availability of the RCM was fundamental to this turning point in the meeting:

Yeah, yeah. We just had to kind of breakdown the barrier if maybe I probably might have viewed the barriers as an excuse as to, you know, Dad came in and he was hot and flustered. There's been a lot going on and up to that point, you know, the son was up to high doh, the principal was up to high doh. So, you know, it was a difficult, but it was just breaking down the barriers and just having the time to allow clear communication and translation, and then from that then we were able to materialise that the Dad was actually as exasperated. He wasn't supporting the son's behaviour in any way shape or form, and he wanted the son in school. So, then, we could, we could clear the confusion and move forward in a clear way.

Supporting Schools Supporting Attendance

In addition to the examples above, there were multiple mentions of the ways in which the RCM supports *in-school* activities targeted at supporting school attendance. On a most basic, fundamental but vitally important level, the RCM provides translation and interpretation support for teachers and school leaders as they seek to maintain open communication with Roma parents. These general supports include, but are not limited to, translations and interpretations, some planned and some in response to developing situations, for example during school meetings, phone calls or written documents, or at drop-off or pick-up times, check-ins with Roma families, for example, home visits, or scheduled one-to-one meetings, and additional explanations regarding the structure and policies of the Irish education system. This support has been of enormous support for school staff. For example, one teacher mentioned how:

[RCM] is great because [she helped to] bring the parents in. So we've had a couple of different days where we've brought the Roma parents in. Yeah, and they got to sit down and ask us questions, but the most basic questions that we assume that we're answering and we're not.

The teacher proceeded, "it's just so much easier to reach the parents". The RCM's availability to support with language and cultural barriers has meant that attendance, particularly in the primary schools, has made significant

improvements. For example, according to one teacher,

I've noticed the attendance is much stronger this year than what it would have been last year and I'm able to access the records that last year, so I suppose going off comparison on paper that, definitely, definitely, much better, like there is a serious improvement. And I do think a lot of it is down to [RCM's] communication techniques and her intervention as well. In certain cases, like, I definitely think there's been a serious improvement because of [RCM] this year.

School-based Sessions

While much of the material above points to the strong contribution that the RCM makes in the support of clearer communication and the development of positive relationships between Roma children, their families and schools, another important element of the work of the RCM is the targeted work undertaken with individual or groups of students. This work is generally undertaken on a withdrawal basis, wherein students are collected from class by the RCM and come to specific rooms within the school. In some schools, an identified space is always available, though these spaces are not always the most welcoming or aesthetically pleasing, while in other schools, the room option depends on availability at any given time as spaces are under demand and rooms are frequently put to a variety of uses.

The children were overwhelmingly positive about this time that they spent with the RCM. When asked about how they feel as they wait for the RCM to come to collect them on their allocated day, one student answered that he is sitting "in class looking at the time, looking at that [clock]" in anticipation of her arrival at the classroom door. Before she comes in he is thinking, "I can't wait, I can't wait". Another student initially claimed that he really likes coming with her because "every time she comes in, she gives us like a treat". When pushed to elaborate on this, he clarified that the RCM works with him to prepare his transition into post-primary school:

she like teaches a lot about secondary . . . like what we should do, so if we like have problems, we come here . . . and she will give me candy.

Most of the students did mention the fact that they have fun in the work with the RCM, and many placed a similar emphasis on the importance of sweets as part of that work:

because when we always come here we play games, we eat sweets, we do all the fun games and we play.

As the conversations deepened, it became clear that the students had many more reasons for appreciating these sessions with the RCM. One of the strongest points to emerge was the relationship of care that the RCM had with the students. As one of the students pointed out:

she asks about me, how I am and how I am doing in school and

everything. She really wants me to do well.

A further point of attraction is the fact that the RCM speaks Romanian, a language in which the students in this study were fluent. According to one student, “she is my favourite teacher *{sic}* because she’s the only one teaching in Romanian”. The student proceeded to clarify, “I don’t really speak that much English . . . I understand her better”

Over the period of the work with the students, it became clearer that the RCM placed a strong focus on the development of language and social skills as part of these sessions. The RCM highlighted how she carefully plans targets for each session, but strives to include a sense of purpose, with clear targets and deliberately maintains a light air and sense of fun. This was appreciated by the students. According to one student:

“[we] play games, play cards, lots of activity. We laugh, we laugh. We play a game or something. If you lose, you need to do things like play stories, or sing or make things, everything.”

One example of this was a card-based language development game, which was played with a group of students in the primary school. The game followed a pattern of choosing a card for another player which asked for three answers to a particular question. This game was enjoyed by the students but also provided opportunities for language learning, for example:

RCM: This might be too hard because you probably don’t know

what a “cellar” is, I mean, do you know what a “cellar” is?

Student: What is a cellar a kind of?

RCM: A basement. Do you know what is a basement?

Student: Oh yeah

RCM: Did you ever see a basement?

Student: No

RCM: Did you ever go in a basement?

Student: No.

The game proceeded on to the RCM challenging the students and *vice versa* to provide three answers to questions such as “Why might a dog bark”, “why might you visit the head teacher’s office” and “what things can adults do that children cannot do”. The students thoroughly enjoyed playing this game and the RCM took advantage to work on some language skills, in terms of both vocabulary and structure, but then also engaged in some deeper conversations regarding social skills. For example, following up on the card which questioned the reasons why a child might visit the head teacher’s office, the RCM guided a conversation on expectations around behaviour in school and moving from negative associations with the school principal’s office to more positive possibilities, asking “could you go to the principal’s office for good things . . . did you ever win something in your school so you can go?”

In addition to the positive views of the students in respect of these sessions, the teachers were generally very positive

about this work. For example, according to one teacher:

I know that [RCM] has tremendous relationships with all the parents as well as the pupils at the start of the year. She did take a small group of them from my class just for a kind of heritage language lessons and just it was actually very casual. I think it was kind of a breather for them, you know, learning in a mainstream classroom [in a] language that isn't your first is very difficult, very tiring . . . It was nice that they had that support, and I suppose . . . breathing space to be able to find a have conversations in their own language and like just normal discussions. They did like activities as well. They were able to go outside and even as well as that like [RCM] works so hard, like for my class.

The teacher proceeded to explain that the RCM was a really important source of knowledge and support for her as a teacher:

Like I found that she was just brilliant, like even times I had to ring her to kind of, I suppose, avoid misunderstandings arising in case I didn't communicate it clearly enough to parents. And I suppose with language barrier and things like that, [RCM] was brilliant, like in that she was always making that phone call or having that conversation and just provide that reassurance for the parents. And it was just. It was brilliant.

In reflecting on the importance of these sessions for certain children, a HSCL claimed the following:

we have one boy, tricky enough behaviour, hard family situation and his one request a week is that he gets to spend some time with [RCM] and I actually genuinely think that's what brings him to school. He's seeing her around all the time. He's had his time with her, you know, he wasn't supposed to be scheduled for groups this year, but if that's what get him through his week, that what we prioritise."

Another teacher claimed:

When they come back from sessions with [RCM], they're calmer. I think it's that space, smaller group, some Romanian, less pressure. (Primary School Teacher 1)

The teachers and school staff strongly appreciated this form of support work provided by the RCM and one of their strongest considerations was that it was not available more frequently for the students in their class or school. This is simply down to the time pressures for the RCM and the fact that they are spread between a number of different schools, on a short hours contract and with a variety of roles to undertake. In addition to the observation that it would be positive to have more withdrawal supports available from the RCM, one teacher believed it might also be helpful if the RCM would be in a position to come into class, to provide in class support on occasion. The RCM herself is fully aware of the many ways in which she is being pulled to provide

supports for Roma children and their schools. In reflecting on the many hats she wears in her role, she outlined:

it is so changing, so many different things to do. It's exciting and does help but also sometimes it is difficult to fit it all in and make sure I have done everything to help all the children and in the school.

One structural issue that appeared as problematic in the successful running of the sessions was that while the RCM had clearly planned many of the exercises within the sessions, there were occasions when these had to change, given disruption to composition of groups, or if something is happening in the school and a child may not be available to attend a session with her. This may happen for a variety of reasons, though it is a source of frustration when such occurrences will be known in advance and have not been communicated to the RCM. The RCM recounted one such frustrating episode when a child's class had been scheduled for class tests, so the child was not going to be available to come with her. This was also a disappointment for the individual child as they had looked forward to the time with the RCM. As such sessions generally only happen on a weekly basis, this meant a big gap between sessions for the child.

Support with Assessment

Another of the very impactful contributions of the RCM was the support provided to parents, children and schools as they made their way through a journey for a Special Educational Needs assessment or as they engage with other

external supports. Some Roma children have additional learning needs that require formal assessment, but fear and misunderstanding can prevent families from consenting to participate in the process. The RCM can play a very important role in supporting the parents through this process. For example, according to one teacher:

I've had cases where I suspect cognitive issues, but the parents won't agree to an assessment. They're scared. [The RCM] helps explain, builds trust and sometimes changes minds.

Two separate examples are provided here, as related by one HSCL, that demonstrate the importance of having access to the RCM in relation to these two areas of support and assessment. In this first excerpt the HSCL describes the role played by the RCM in an assessment process:

Say this week we had a Roma family. The child had an assessment and [the parents] didn't turn up for the assessment feedback, which means the school can't get the feedback. So, I was able to contact [RCM]. She was able to ring the family. There was just miscommunication. They didn't realise they had to be somewhere. So, she made sure that happened, which obviously then has a positive effect for the child in school. You know, so it's like even little things like that that only take two or three minutes. But it's so beneficial for everybody.

According to the HSCL, the parents had been “fully involved and totally supportive” of the assessment process, but this lapse may have caused a significant delay in securing appropriate supports for the child. The lapse happened because:

They hadn’t understood a letter that they received, so they never turned up for the feedback because of obviously, the language barrier. They misinterpreted the letter, and they didn’t realise they had to.

At the end of this discussion, the HSCL pointed out that the school always tries to work with the RCM in explaining assessments to Roma parents. The teacher argued that this is important because:

we feel that the parents respond better to [RCM] because she’s so familiar to them. A lot of them don’t like other translators.

This observation led to an account of a problematic episode with a translator who was not known to a parent or the school:

only last week in this school we had a parent in speak to a Speech and Language Therapist . . . and he actually requested the translator leave because he had a small bit of English, but not a lot . . . he understood some bits that the Speech and Language Therapist was saying, and the translator was not communicating this to him . . . so he himself was like, ‘I want to end this meeting. She’s not telling me everything you’re saying’. And he was like, ‘I will do this meeting again’.

Improving the Service

Finally, in this section, it is important to reflect on some of the improvements which participants suggested for the service provided by the RCM. The most consistent observation in respect of the limitations of the service was that the RCM was too stretched and that there was a significant need for an increase in both the availability of the RCM to individual students and schools, and this was extended to the possibility of increasing the number of RCMs available within the system. According to one HSCL:

more hours . . . we’re so lucky that [RCM] goes above and beyond but realistically her work hours are short [but] no matter when I text her saying ‘we have this problem, can we sort it?’ she’ll always do it, but that’s outside her work hours. You know, [if we had] more hours with [RCM], it would be so beneficial.

Similarly, one of the post-primary teachers explained her view on the service:

I think it’s excellent. Yeah, it’d be better if we had her for more amount of time, right, but it has made a positive difference here. Definitely, 100%”

Many of the children were of a similar view that they would like to “spend more time” with the RCM and that she should be “in this school all the time”.

The hours available to the SCP in respect of the work of the RCM are limited. The SCP leadership work hard to secure available funding but there is no dependability for this funding line. This precarity has a knock-on effect, both in

terms of the hours that the RCM is available to each school and on the terms and conditions of employment of the RCM. This has implications in terms of both job security, for example, and pension.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study makes clear that Roma communities in Ireland experience layered and intersecting forms of structural disadvantage, including poverty, racism, housing insecurity and exclusion from public services. While these are not new insights, the data collected in this study give them renewed urgency, revealing how these challenges emerge in everyday educational experiences. The evidence presented here speaks not only to the persistent structural inequalities that shape Roma children's engagement with school, but also to the transformative potential of Roma Cultural Mediation (RCM) as a response.

Across all participant groups, Roma children and their families, school and agency staff, the RCM was described as a central figure enabling inclusion. What emerges from this study is a picture of an under-recognised but essential infrastructure: a relational, linguistic and cultural bridge spanning the gap between marginalised communities and the mainstream education system. Below, we reflect on four core themes that offer both conceptual insight and practical recommendations.

Trust as Infrastructure

One of the clearest findings from this study is that the RCM's effectiveness rests not only on her professional actions, but on the deep reservoir of trust she has established with Roma families. In a context of widespread antigypsyism and a history of surveillance and exclusion by state systems, trust cannot be assumed, it must be earned. That the RCM is not herself Roma, but is deeply embedded in the community through shared linguistic

and cultural reference points, is crucial. Her fluency in Romanian, her long-standing presence and her visible commitment to families' wellbeing all contribute to this trust.

This trust functions as an essential infrastructure for engagement. It allows the RCM to act as an interpreter, not only of language, but of institutional logics, expectations and norms that are often opaque to families unfamiliar with the Irish education system. In effect, she enables mutual intelligibility between two worlds.

Recommendation: Roma Cultural Mediation should be recognised and funded as a core component of inclusive education practice, not an *ad hoc* supplement. Selection and training of RCMs should continue to emphasise linguistic and cultural alignment, alongside sustained engagement with the community.

Mediation as System Translation

While much attention is given in policy to "engaging hard-to-reach families," this report highlights how challenging school systems can be for newly arrived or marginalised communities. The RCM's role in "translating the system" is vital. This includes not just helping families complete school forms or attend meetings, but unveiling the implicit assumptions of school life, for example, in relation to uniform policies, attendance legislation, assessment processes and expectations around transitions.

The work of the RCM mitigates institutional opacity, but also reveals its persistence. In some ways, she acts as a

“fixer” for a system that is not yet designed with Roma learners and families in mind. She smooths some of the frictions, but her presence also highlights where structural change is overdue.

Recommendation: Teacher Education and Teacher Professional Learning opportunities should include explicit focus on institutional accessibility and hidden curriculum. Schools should be resourced to review their processes in collaboration with community mediators to ensure they are not unintentionally exclusionary.

Precarity Undermines Impact

Despite the clear value of the RCM’s role, it is structurally precarious. Short-hour contracts, insecure funding and lack of role clarity constrain what is deeply impactful work. There is also a danger that, as demand for the RCM’s support grows, her work becomes fragmented and stretched. This has the potential to undermine the consistency, depth and ultimately the quality of engagement that is core to her success.

Moreover, the SCP model that houses this role, while flexible and responsive, has built-in limitations. Roma students transitioning to schools outside the SCP cluster may lose access to the RCM, just as new challenges emerge at post-primary level.

Recommendation: Secure, full-time positions for RCMs should be introduced and ringfenced within Department of Education-funded supports, with scope for continuity across school transitions. Schools enrolling Roma students should be enabled to formally request access to RCMs or equivalent roles. Attention needs to be paid to possibilities when supports

for Traveller and Roma children are banded together, as it is not clear that such positions will demand, or even facilitate the cultural perspectives necessary to work deeply with both minoritised ethnic groups.

RCMs as Relational Educators

While the RCM in this study is not a teacher, her work frequently intersects with pedagogy. Indeed, she is frequently referred to as a teacher by some of the children with whom she works. The RCM facilitates sessions that blend language development, social learning and emotional support. These moments are often informal, playful and held in the child’s own language. They are not tangential to education; they are precisely the kinds of relational encounters that build confidence, belonging and school attachment. They recognise the Roma child.

It is important to realise, however, that some tensions arise here. Without role clarity, RCMs may be pulled into pedagogical territory without institutional recognition or support. At the same time, their unique positioning makes them ideally suited to support informal, culturally-responsive learning.

Recommendation: The role of the RCM should be more explicitly situated within a “whole-school” approach to inclusion. Role guidance should recognise the pedagogical potential of such mediation work as appropriate, and offer space for collaboration with class teachers, while ensuring mediators are not expected or encouraged to replace trained educators. This would have the additional benefit of supporting teacher professional learning.

Final Reflection

This research shows that the RCM in the current study is not simply a liaison or translator. Like all good quality cultural mediators working with marginalised communities, she establishes trust, navigates complex systems and works as an agent of inclusion. Her work compensates for some of the blind spots of a system still struggling to meet the needs of one of Europe's most marginalised communities. The message from students, families and staff is unambiguous: without the RCM, the system would struggle, and indeed fail, to reach some of its most vulnerable children.

"She has the trust we could spend years trying to earn... That's the difference she makes."

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